The National Road
A Story with Many Facets—A Road with Many Resources

Linda Kelly

The National Road is one story with many facets. A large linear and diverse landscape, the National Road is the federally-funded road built between 1811-1838, and spans six states. Beginning in Cumberland, MD, the road crosses through the southwestern part of Pennsylvania, meets the Ohio River in West Virginia, continues west toward Columbus, OH, and Indianapolis, IN, crosses the state line in Terre Haute, IN, and heads southwest to its terminus at the first state capital of Illinois, Vandalia.

Today, the National Road is a vital but slower-paced corridor clearly different from interstate travel. Along the road are numerous cultural resources relating to the heyday of the road. Actual road segments also can be found. Opportunities exist to interpret the evolution of roads including the development of U.S. 40 and Interstate 70.

The National Park Service (NPS), at the request of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission, is conducting a Special Resource Study to provide a contextual overview of the National Road and to evaluate the Pennsylvania portion of the project within the context of the entire road. One of the purposes of the study is to determine if an area meets the criteria for creation of a new unit of the national park system, or might more appropriately be marked and interpreted by other public agencies or private organizations. The methods to accomplish this task include looking at the road's apparent level of significance, themes it represents and the feasibility or suitability of the resource as a National Park area or another designation.

Research and Fieldwork

The study team traveled the length of the National Road in June 1992, using an inventory form developed by the team to record characteristics of various segments. A segment was determined to be a length of road along which characteristics were similar. A new inventory form was begun each time there was a break or change. The relative location of the National Road was noted, whether it was close to the original alignment, now a part of U.S. 40, or consumed by Interstate 70. General road alignment design was observed, a product of terrain and the era of the last realignment. General visual characteristics for urban and rural areas were recorded for foreground, middleground, and background of the road prism. Cultural resources were noted by type and era; this was based on both background information and observation. Notes were made on interpretive and recreation potential. Sketches of road sections were made to capture the overall character of each segment, and notes about feelings, association, and integrity recorded the intangibles. A total of 28 forms were completed between Cumberland and Vandalia.

The study team also gathered information regarding available interpretive opportunities along the National Road during the June field trip. The team visited or inventoried interpretive signs, identification signs, and interpretive centers/museums focusing on National Road resources. Other interpretive resources were identified through follow-up telephone conversations.

Based on observation and available information the team also looked at and recorded the character, quality and clustering of historic resources along the National Road.

Planning Within a Six State Corridor

Commencing in spring of 1992, the first step was to determine the apparent level of resource significance. The NPS team has identified that the National Road possesses exceptional value in illustrating and interpreting the development and improvement of roadways which are a part of our nation's heritage.

Another step in this process is to ascertain if the road is suitable for inclusion in the national park system by determining if the area represents a theme that is not adequately represented in the NPS or another agency. Using the *History and Prehistory in the National Park System* (1987) the team discovered that the National Road corridor falls within two sub-

THE NATIONAL ROAD
Cumberland - Vandalia
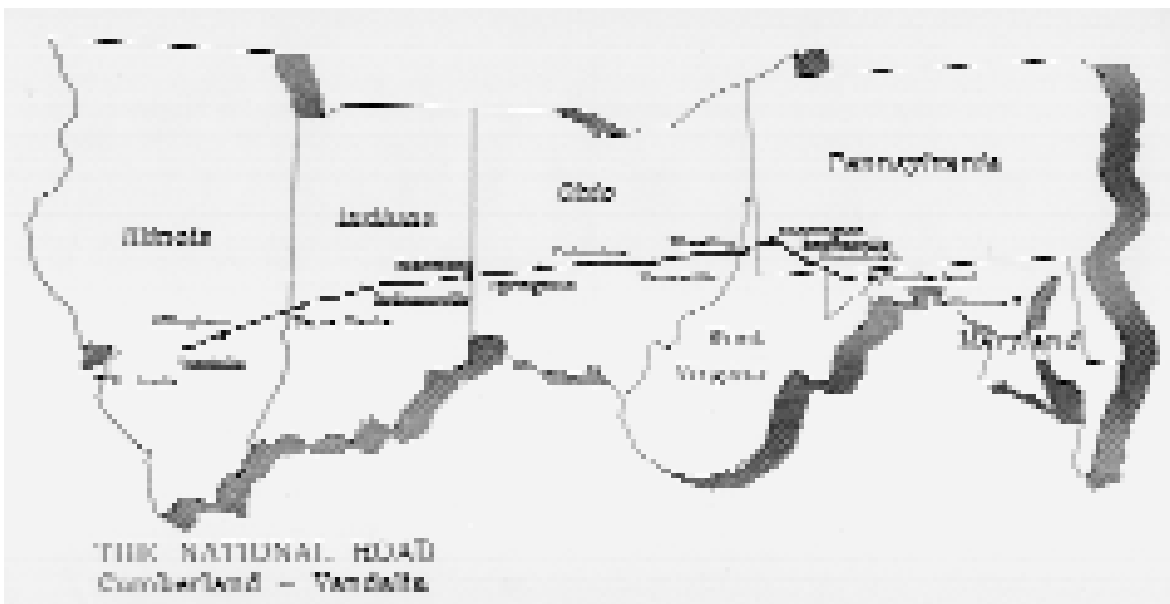
themes of the transportation theme—early turnpikes, road and taverns; and automobiles, buses, wagons, and highways (see sidebar).

Methodology

After establishing its significance and themes, the team did a visual assessment of the road and talked to many people who have an interest in the road. During the assessment, certain characteristics about the road emerged. The differences between road-related resources such as inns and taverns from the early origins of the road or gas stations and eateries from the auto era were sometimes subtle and at other times dramatic. In some places realignments have funneled traffic and change away from old road segments and towns, leaving "oxbows" abundant with historic resources. Evolution of road development was apparent along certain stretches in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois with old brick road trace, current U.S. 40 and I-70 all within close proximity. Along the way, local efforts to highlight the history of the road was evident through street signs and business fronts, which carry the name National Road, National Pike, or U.S. 40.

The team collected a variety of written material in the form of brochures and interpretive pamphlets which demonstrated the desire of the region's citizens to tell others about the National Road story.

After completing this process the team took the project a step further. They used a method called a Delphi which features commentary and feedback designed to gather information and ideas which would normally be impossible to gather without a common group discussion.[1]

Typically, the Delphi is a vehicle to gather information from technical experts. In our case, we expanded our audience to include not only the technical experts but those who had a vested interest in the road as well. Special interest or expert groups included local and state economic development groups, the Department of Transportation in each state, authors, interpretive specialists, parks and recreation departments, and a National Road artist.

Packaging the Delphi was very important. The team felt that in order to get the participants to respond, we had to give them a reason to look at the material. We

Bridgeport, OH, old road trace and U.S. 40 bridge. Illustration by Alison Cook.

took the time to make an attractive package that would generate curiosity about our project and research or materials. The packaging took the form of a pocket folder with a newsletter describing the project. Some of the elements we included were a section describing the importance of the National Road, resources and planning initiatives in the six state corridor, and interpretive efforts presently in place along the road.

West of Indianapolis, IN. Illustration by Alison Cook.

The key to the success of any Delphi process is communication between the many parties interested in a particular project or topic. In our case, this was accomplished in two ways—the response form and the participant list. We wanted our audience to use the response form to offer ideas for management, interpretation and use of the National Road.

The results from the response form were synthesized and shared with the group on the mailing list. This gave the participants the opportunity to learn what others felt was most important about the road.

The other tool, a participant list, served as a directory of the many different parties having involvement or future potential for National Road projects. By placing it in the pocket folder, participants could keep the materials together for future reference and contacts.

Out of 95 Delphi packages we distributed, a total of 38 responses were returned. Thirty-three pages of typewritten comments were compiled. Some of the responses were the result of people learning about the Delphi through those participating in this process. The team was pleased with the response because we heard from a diverse cross-section of participants who had an interest in the road and were able to offer suggestions and advice on how the National Road could be managed and protected; and because the process has allowed participants to network with others who are involved with historic transportation corridor interpretive and preservation efforts along the National Road and other areas.

The results of the Delphi were mixed. While many feel it is a high priority to educate the public about the road's place in history, others felt that an emphasis on the identification of extant resources and landscape protection was critical, since many are currently threatened. In short, an emphasis on historic preservation and landscape protection must concurrently occur while educat-

- recruitment of appropriate businesses to the corridor with a comprehensive database and marketing analysis;
- a revolving loan fund available for projects throughout the corridor;
- a network of visitors centers; and
- numerous other ideas.

Eventually these communities could provide strong participation in the overall direction and goals of the corridor management and strong support. Their grassroots, collaborative approach could extend to issues beyond the specific downtowns and communities, adding participation and activity to planning and implementation of the corridor.

The second opportunity is heritage tourism. This, as we all know, is not an unmixed blessing. We have witnessed the proliferation of T-shirt shops, beer, and country western music in New Orleans' Bourbon Street until one wonders where the heritage is; the economic displacement of long-time residents occurring in Santa Fe, NM; and the commercial signs and homogenized fast food places cheek by jowl with the Gettysburg battlefield.

Yet it is also true that few historic house museums could exist as such without the economic support of visitors. Historic communities from Charleston to Carmel, and cities from Boston to San Francisco, owe an important part of their revenues to tourism.

Tourism is, without doubt, a massive economic force, here to stay. Travel and tourism contributed nearly $350 billion in expenditures in 1991 in the United States alone. Tourism is the largest economic generator in 17 states, and second or third in nearly all the rest.

And, generally for the better, historic places and historic ambiance consistently rank among the top attractors of visitors.

Seeing both these potentials and the dangers, the National Trust more than four years ago formulated the Heritage Tourism Initiative. Its aim was to create partnerships at the local, state and national level to further responsible tourism with the emphasis on heritage. Four states—Indiana, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin—were selected through a competitive process as demonstration states, each with four pilot areas. Now, we will soon complete three years of work in these areas. Nearly all the pilot areas include several communities, many contain several counties, and three are based upon historic transportation corridors.

For example, along the transportation corridor north from Milwaukee to Manitowac lie some 22 ethnic communities.

Most important in the program is a comprehensive approach including assessment of potential for heritage tourism, strategic planning, product development, and marketing and research. It is an approach that gives communities the best chances of success in heritage tourism over the long term.

Perhaps most exciting in the program is progress in smaller communities in working together on a regional basis. Despite decades of seeing themselves in competition with each other—from high school football to business—communities are realizing that they can only compete in tourism by being part of a larger whole: thus, support for creating regional plans and destinations in the pilot areas.

The National Trust is now converting its experience in these 16 pilot areas into a permanent Heritage Tourism Program, whose goal is a responsible marriage of historic preservation and tourism. One of the major lessons of our work is that responsible heritage tourism, grounded in sound principles and a comprehensive approach, can be an important component of historic transportation corridors.

Using the economic attraction of responsible tourism and the grassroots approach of Main Street can help us draw communities together in support of historic transportation corridors and can move many corridors beyond good **plans** to good **action.**

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ing the public about the importance of these resources. Telling the "story" of the National Road will provide support and understanding of the resources and the landscapes that surround them.

Conclusion

Because most historic transportation corridors are large linear landscapes, protecting and preserving the National Road Corridor for its scenic, cultural, and historic resources will be a difficult task. By building constituencies, letting others know about National Road related projects and using programs that are already in place, preservation, protection, and education about the importance of the National Road may ultimately result in shared management and maintenance of the historic corridor. Through the combined efforts of many, the public can begin to understand the beginnings of federally funded road development in this country and where it is headed.

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Notes

[1]   The Delphi process is designed to conduct a brainstorming session, and eventually establish consensus about a particular topic, with recognized experts using mailback response forms rather than attempting to get all of the participants together in the same room. Although similar to using newsletter/questionnaires with the general public, the Delphi process is targeted to specific individuals for specific purposes, rather than seeking more general kinds of feedback from the general public.

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